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## Chapter 9

### **The life of Aristippus in the *Socratic Epistles*: Three interpretations**

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Sometime in the second or third century CE an anonymous epistolographer authored a series of letters purporting to pass between Socrates' followers after his death. The most interesting of these are ascribed to Aristippus, who was the notional founder of the sceptical and hedonistic Cyrenaic school of philosophy. Among the key sources for these letters were the collections of anecdotes and sayings which Momigliano has called the 'truest antecedents of biography and autobiography,'<sup>1</sup> which continued to make up the bulk of many works actually entitled 'lives of the philosophers' in this period.<sup>2</sup> It is this biographical aspect of pseudepistolography which merits a discussion of these letters in the present volume. Aristippus does not discuss philosophical theories, but rather his own lifestyle and that of his addressees. This distinction between lifestyle and theory turns out to occupy a prominent place in the scholarship on the historical Aristippus, where it is also presented through the dichotomy between 'performance' or 'art' and 'science'. The Socratic epistles afford us an opportunity to re-examine these dichotomies. The goal of this chapter is therefore to explore several ways in which, while imagining Aristippus' discussion of his 'artful' lifestyle, the epistolographer permits us to reconstruct and evaluate an Aristippean philosophy.

#### **I. THE EPISTLES AND EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP ON ARISTIPPEAN ETHICS**

I will begin by offering a provisional reading of ethics in the epistles. There are two guiding questions for this section. First, how can these letters contribute to existing scholarship on Aristippean philosophy? Second, what sort of ethics does Aristippus defend and display in these letters? In order to motivate these questions, it is first necessary to offer an overview of the relevant passages.

Though Aristippus is the author, recipient, or subject of 11 of the 35 epistles, I will be focusing on epistles 8 through 13, which provide the most detailed and coherent portrait. In

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<sup>1</sup> (1971) 23.

<sup>2</sup> On biographies of philosophers and the anecdotal tradition, see Tsouna-McKirahan (1994) 387-91; Mann (1996) 105-12; Mansfeld (1994) 179-91; Branham (1989) 58-63; Goldhill (2009) 96-113.

letter 8 Antisthenes, who was famed in antiquity for his austerity, writes from Athens to Aristippus, who is living it up in the court of Dionysius II of Syracuse.<sup>3</sup> Antisthenes writes, ‘The philosopher isn’t someone who stays with tyrants and devotes himself to Sicilian tables, but rather someone who lives in his own country and desires only what’s sufficient’ (p. 244.1-3 Malherbe<sup>4</sup>). He urges Aristippus to cure his sybaritic impulses with hellebore, which today we know as an emetic, abortifacient and poison, and the ancients represent as a cure for everything from melancholia to imprudence.<sup>5</sup> Aristippus responds in letter 9 with profound irony, thanking Antisthenes for his concern, craving his pity for his pathological hedonism and congratulating Antisthenes on his healthier devotion to pure water, barley bread and a single filthy garment.

Letters 10 and 11 comprise a brief exchange between Aeschines and Aristippus, in which the former asks Aristippus to intercede on behalf of some Locrians who are in trouble with Dionysius, and Aristippus assures him he’ll take care of *everything*. But ‘don’t tell Antisthenes if I’ve saved your friends’, he asks in letter 11, ‘since he doesn’t like having tyrants for friends, preferring to seek out barley-sellers and tavern-keepers’ (248.13-6).

There follows a complaint against Aristippus from Simon the Cobbler. ‘I hear you’ve been mocking my wisdom with Dionysius’, he writes in letter 12. ‘Well, I admit I’m a cobbler, this is the work I do. All the same, if necessary I’d even cut leather straps to instruct fools who think, against the advice of Socrates, that they should live luxuriously’ (250.1-7). Once again, Aristippus responds ironically, advising the leather-cutter it would be more profitable to cut straps for fashionable Syracusan shoes than for whipping lapsed philosophers. ‘Don’t you realize’, he adds in letter 13, ‘that by always wearing shoes I magnify your business? But Antisthenes always goes barefoot! What does he accomplish other than taking away your work and profit, since he persuades the young and all the Athenians to go barefoot? So consider what a good friend I am by embracing comfort and pleasure’ (251.29-252.2).

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<sup>3</sup> Dionysius II reigned ca. 367-56 and 346-44 BCE. As Obens (1912) 19-20, Köhler (1923) 103 and Sykutris (1933) 50-51 agree, the fictional date of letters 10-11 is 361 BCE. I presume letters 8-9 share this date.

<sup>4</sup> I use the page and line numbering from (Malherbe 1977).

<sup>5</sup> In fact Theophrastus recognizes two sorts of hellebore, black and white, which have different properties (*Hist. pl.* 9.10.4).

From this preliminary overview it is already clear that these letters stage a confrontation between Aristippus' lifestyle of suave hedonism and a particularly ascetic version of Cynicism.<sup>6</sup> We find this same version of Cynicism in most of the pseudonymous letters of Crates and Diogenes of Sinope, one of which is also addressed to Aristippus (Diogenes 32). The confrontation in our letters begins in the exchange with Antisthenes, where Aristippus, rather than responding earnestly to Antisthenes' principled criticism, deflects it with irony. It continues in the exchange with Aeschines, which is explicitly formulated to display the merits of Aristippus' behaviour. It is Aristippus' good relationship with a tyrant, after all, and not Antisthenes' relationships with barley sellers, which will save the lives of the Locrians. Finally, this confrontation reaches its climax in the exchange with Simon, who was probably not a historical figure, but rather a fictional hero of late Cynicism.<sup>7</sup> Simon converts Antisthenes' verbal lashing into the threat of a physical one, but once again Aristippus refuses to engage with him seriously: he replaces the real grounds for Simon's indignation with an argument about his cobbling business, and then reduces Simon's principled objections to the economics of cutting leather.

Now that I have outlined these letters' content, let me return to my first question: What do these letters contribute to the scholarship on Aristippus? By way of answering, I should explain that according to a recent article by Mann, 'There is nothing to Aristippus' philosophy besides the way he lives his life. That life is not to be explained, but shown.'<sup>8</sup> This contrast between Aristippus' philosophical performance and the articulate theories of philosophers such as Aristotle recurs throughout the scholarship, going back at least to the 1890s, when von Arnim, Natorp and Gomperz spoke of Aristippus as a *Lebenskünstler* ('artist of living') rather than a *Wissenschaftler* ('scientist') (on this distinction see also Güthenke, this volume).<sup>9</sup> One reason to be suspicious of this distinction is that it projects onto fourth-century philosophy nineteenth-century debates about the study of classical antiquity, whether it ought to be a professional 'science' or a paradigm for personal and social transformation. But we need not consign Aristippean ethics to 'artful' inarticulacy simply

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<sup>6</sup> Hodkinson (2007) 287 and 298 notes that juxtaposing different viewpoints is one thing epistolary collections do well.

<sup>7</sup> See Sellars (2003b).

<sup>8</sup> Mann (1996) 119.

<sup>9</sup> Natorp (1895) 904, Arnim (1898) 23, Gomperz (1905) 213. Compare Giannantoni (1958) 23, 42-54, 70-73.

because he prefers characteristic ways of speaking and acting to systematic theory. If we are to appreciate the stature accorded to him by the history of philosophy, we must at least attempt to translate his various performances into some sort of verbal analysis.

First we must say a few words about how these letters capture Aristippus' performative lifestyle. If we want to move past the dichotomy between showing and telling, we should look for something intelligible that unifies Aristippus' way of speaking and acting. Here we may recall Demetrius' often-cited line that 'It's almost as a likeness of his own soul that each person writes a letter' (*De eloc.* 227). This obviously suggests that some sort of psychical paradigm manifests itself in epistolary writing, but this paradigm remains a polysemous metaphor. In order to clarify it, I will initially suggest that we are dealing with the dispositions, intentions and aspirations that make up the letter-writer's *character*. These can be plotted along a narrative of character development, as in the seventeen letters ascribed to Chion of Heraclea.<sup>10</sup> Or they can be varied by situation, as in the letters of Socrates. The important point is that, whether the character is developing or static, at issue is a recognizable core of selfhood, which is felt to capture something important about an exemplary lifestyle.

Now let us return to the details of Aristippus' exchange with Antisthenes. In the course of Antisthenes' brief letter, he packs in an abundance of value terms. As we saw above, he begins by saying what 'the philosopher' would do. It is worth quoting the remainder of this brief letter in its entirety (*Epistle* 8):

But you think that where the good man excels is in being able to get wealth and have powerful friends. Yet neither is wealth necessary, nor, if it were necessary, would it be good if acquired in this way, nor can the many and ignorant be friends, especially when they're tyrants to boot. So I'd advise you to leave Syracuse and Sicily. But if, as some say, you're crazy for pleasure and stuck to things that don't suit prudent men, depart to Anticyra, and a drink of hellebore will help. It's much better than Dionysius' wine. Wine makes you wholly mad, this stops madness. You'd be as much better than you are now as sanity and prudence are better than sickness and folly. Be well.

244.5-19 Malherbe

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<sup>10</sup> See Düring (1951) Konstan and Mitsis (1990) Trapp (2006) 44-46.

In this passage Antisthenes does not so much lay out an argument as hope that Aristippus will recognize himself in the value terms he uses – on the positive side, philosophy, moral goodness, sanity and prudence; on the negative, sickness, folly, madness and loss of control – and that he will draw the appropriate conclusions. Each of these terms implies a vague multitude of dispositions to feel and act, as Antisthenes sometimes makes explicit. For example, he suggests someone committed to ‘philosophical’ behaviour will be repulsed by Dionysius’ luxurious, bibulous symposia. This is a common way of conceiving of character in Greek philosophy, and appears for example in the works of Aristotle. Precisely what makes our purposive actions belong to us, Aristotle suggests in the *Ethics*, is that they arise from the dispositions making up our character.<sup>11</sup> When people do not act according to these dispositions, he adds in the *Poetics*, it makes for unintelligible drama, because the characters’ thoughts and intentions no longer serve to explain their actions.<sup>12</sup> Antisthenes’ gambit is that Aristippus, thinking about the intellectual and emotional commitments implied by these value terms, and considering how they correspond to his own dispositions, will decide that the only intelligible thing for *someone like him* to do is to abandon Dionysius’ hospitality. In other words, as he enacts the plot of his life, he should conclude that *this character*, this prudent, philosophical, good and healthy-minded man, cannot intelligibly act otherwise.

This is Antisthenes’ persuasive strategy, but of course it does not work. One reason for this failure is that, insofar as Aristippus displays some concern for stability of character, his commitments are not those Antisthenes wants to impute to him. Consider the beginning of his responding letter.

My unhappiness, Antisthenes, is by no means moderate. How am I not going to be unhappy, since I live with a tyrant, eating and drinking extravagantly every day, being anointed with the most delicious perfume, and trailing a long Tarentine cloak? And no one will save me from Dionysius’ cruelty, who holds me like a hostage – not a nobody, but a steward of Socratic discourses! And like I said, he feeds me, anoints me, and dresses me like this and neither fears the gods’ justice nor feels shame before men, treating me like this! And now it’s gone from bad to worse, when he gave me three Sicilian women of

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<sup>11</sup> See esp. *NE* 3.1-5.

<sup>12</sup> See esp. *Po.* 6, 15 with the commentary of Halliwell (1986) 138-67. For a fascinating elaboration of what Aristotle leaves unsaid in both works, see Ricoeur (1990) 89-94 and 140-68.

outstanding beauty and a pile of money. And I don't know when this man will stop doing these things!

244.21-246.4 Malherbe

I have quoted at length in order to communicate Aristippus' tone and perspective. Of course it would be ludicrous to read his character straight from his words, which are dripping with irony. But if we borrow Vlastos' interpretation of Socratic irony, we can propose that Aristippus' words present a very simple riddle.<sup>13</sup> The gist of Vlastos' position is that an ironist's words are intended to carry a meaning other than what is customary. This may be the opposite of the customary meaning, as when we say, 'What a beautiful day!' when it is hailing.<sup>14</sup> For the moment, let us assume this is what Aristippus is doing: he means more or less the opposite of what he is saying. So when he says he is very miserable, he means he is very happy; when he says the tyrant is cruel, he means beneficent; and when he says things have gone from bad to worse, he means things just keep getting better!

We can formulate how this evaluation of the situation relates to Aristippus' sense of selfhood by deepening our engagement with Aristotelian thought, this time in its creative reappropriation by Ricoeur. I said before that character helps determine what a certain sort of person will do in a certain situation: it is what guarantees that his behaviour expresses who he is. We can now add that this grounding of choice in character is just one aspect of an individual's evaluative orientation, which at its horizon encompasses his entire life. Aristotle argues that people *ought* to clarify the sort of life they want to live so that they can orient all their deliberation and action toward achieving this flourishing life.<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur suggests that such an orientation actually *does* emerge from each individual's oscillating shifts in perspective, during reflection, deliberation, and purposive action, between comprehensive goals, habitual practices and particular choices and outcomes.<sup>16</sup> For example, Aristippus might take 'pleasant living' to be his *comprehensive* goal, he might *habitually* prefer the

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<sup>13</sup> I draw on theories of Socratic irony because they are among the most fully developed theories of irony available and because Aristippus' beliefs and interests loosely resemble those of his one-time companion. However, I acknowledge that there are also differences. I develop and diversify my interpretation of Aristippean irony later in this chapter.

<sup>14</sup> Strictly speaking, Vlastos (1987) only speaks of 'complex irony' as 'riddling.'

<sup>15</sup> *NE* 1.1-2. For the practicalities of this orientation, see especially 3.1-5, 6.1-5.

<sup>16</sup> (1990) 152-80.

company of tyrants to tradesmen, and he might *particularize* this goal and these habits by choosing to eat this fish now, visit a courtesan later, etc. The orientation which arises from such a network is an important aspect of our sense of who we are. Taylor puts this concisely: ‘To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is formed by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose.’<sup>17</sup>

With this in mind, we can see more clearly that Aristippus’ ironic response is a powerful expression of his identity. Later in the same letter, he writes,

For the madness by which I thoughtlessly came to these absurdities, I curse myself as I deserve, that I should never leave these evils, since at this age and appearing to have some sense I still didn’t want to be hungry, cold, in ill repute, and to grow a long beard.

246.18-23 Malherbe

Here, by ironic negation, Aristippus lays claim to the very characteristics Antisthenes summoned him to identify with – but he orients them toward a different conception of happiness. When he acknowledges his ‘madness,’ ‘thoughtlessness,’ and lack of ‘good sense,’ of course he means that he both values and believes he possesses the contraries of these characteristics: a healthy mind, good counsel and sound sense. For the ‘evils’ that he mentions are of course goods, namely the tyrant’s friendship, elegant clothes, fine food, beautiful women and delicious perfumes; and he is employing his healthy mind, good counsel and good sense to pursue and preserve these goods. In affirming these excellences of character with reference to these general dispositions and particular choices, Aristippus expresses who he is. This identity is further articulated in his statement that he shares ‘Socratic teachings’ with Dionysius, and in his assurance to Aeschines that, through his friendship with Dionysius, he will save the Locrians. Aristippus is not just a versatile servant of his own bodily pleasures, he is also someone who embraces philosophical reflection and can be counted on to help his friends.

By now I hope that the way in which these letters present Aristippus’ lifestyle is becoming clearer: we are not dealing with a developmental narrative, but rather a consistent

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<sup>17</sup> (1989) 27.



ethical orientation which expresses itself in actions or sayings and gives them meaning.<sup>18</sup> I promised also to consider how this life articulates an Aristippean ethics, and we have made some progress in that direction as well. For we have not only explained how the interaction of comprehensive, intermediate and particular goals defines any given life, we have also begun to fill in this scheme with particularly Aristippean values: at the most comprehensive level, a life of refined pleasure; at the intermediate level, the excellences of sanity, good counsel, good sense and helping your friends; at the particular level, a series of pleasant experiences, unruffled management of criticism and effective action on Aeschines' behalf.

On the other hand, it would be foolish to make too much of these results. It is all very well to say that life is about refined pleasure achieved through sanity, wisdom and integrity, but the real mystery of Aristippus' life is how he makes these things come together. This is ~~what the real mystery of Aristippus' life, which~~ Gomperz calls Aristippus' 'virtuosity in the art of living'.<sup>19</sup> And it is not yet clear whether these letters resolve this mystery. So at this point let us turn to another aspect of the letters, namely their humorous dimension.

## II. IRONY AND HUMOUR

Aristippus' brand of humour is very unusual in pseudonymous philosophers' epistles. The letters ascribed to Socrates, Diogenes, Crates, or Heraclitus share Aristippus' low level of doctrinal subtlety and argumentative rigor, but combine this with an oppressive seriousness of which Aristippus is happily innocent. This calls for some sort of commentary. What difference can it make when a philosopher addresses substantial ethical topics with humour rather than painstaking gravity or hortatory vehemence? At least three possibilities occur to me. First, in company with the irony to which it is akin, humour may imply claims about the status of knowledge. Second, humour may affect the attitudes of listeners, and thus help persuade them to agree with you, to like you, and perhaps to do what you want. Third, humour may encourage reflection. Here I will try to understand Aristippus' irony and humour as elements in dynamic interaction with ethical beliefs and goals. This will involve experimentation with very charitable readings, which will require qualification later; but it will also lay the groundwork for the third section.

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<sup>18</sup> This bears some similarity to what Dickson (2009) proposes for the "autobiographical" content of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*.

<sup>19</sup> See n. 000 19 above.

Let me begin by revisiting the scholarship on Socratic irony, which again provides a suggestive template for Aristippus. While irony is not always humorous, we have already seen that Aristippus' tendency not to say what he means involves jokes at the expense of Antisthenes and Simon. Back in his response to Antisthenes, for example, he advises his recipient to 'Bathe and drink from the Nine Spouts fountain, and wear the same filthy cloak summer and winter, as befits a free man living democratically' (246.10-13). Obviously Aristippus does *not* think that these are marks of 'freedom', and part of his intention is to mock Antisthenes for thinking so. Earlier I suggested that Aristippus' irony amounts to saying the contrary of what he means, but now I would like to observe that it is often more complicated than that. As Nehamas writes,

Irony often insinuates that something is taking place inside you that your audience is not allowed to see, but it does not always entail that you see it yourself. Irony often communicates that only a part of a picture is visible to an audience, but it does not always entail that the speaker sees the whole.

Sometimes, it does not even imply that a whole picture exists.<sup>20</sup>

We can explain Nehamas' claim by contrasting Antisthenes and Simon with Aristippus. Antisthenes is so vehemently certain he 'sees the whole picture' that he not only tells Aristippus what a 'good' and 'philosophical' man ought to do, he also urges him to 'cure' himself with a poisonous 'medicine'. Simon is even ready to 'instruct' Aristippus with a leather whip. By contrast, Aristippus makes no real effort to persuade either Antisthenes or Simon of the soundness of his own beliefs. In the text that I have just quoted, for example, he obviously means to contest the meaning of 'freedom' and its relations to tyranny, democracy, self-indulgence and self-denial. In fact, he emphasizes this disagreement in the closing lines of the letter: 'Meanwhile keep going to talk with Simon the cobbler. There neither exists nor is likely to exist anyone better for you in terms of wisdom. As for me, I've been forbidden to approach tradesmen, since *I'm under someone else's power*' (246.29-33, italics mine). Here again Aristippus mocks Antisthenes' conceptions of freedom and power. So why does he not explain his own beliefs about these things? Of course, part of the reason may be that he considers Antisthenes and Simon beneath instruction, or beyond persuasion. But it is also worth asking whether Aristippus has a more fundamental reason for refusing to articulate his position.

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<sup>20</sup> Nehamas (1998) 67.

Consider another passage from his letter to Antisthenes: ‘It’s good of you to be upset over others’ unhappiness. I too will take pleasure in your happiness, so that I’ll seem to reciprocate and repay the favour’ (246.4-7). Here Aristippus does not simply mean the contrary of what he says. For example, he may indeed mean that Antisthenes acts *badly* to sympathize with him, since in fact he requires no sympathy; but it is dubious whether he cares about Antisthenes’ so-called ‘happiness’. And the clause about reciprocity is humorous nonsense, since it rests on premises about their respective happiness that Aristippus does not accept. But that does not mean it is *merely* nonsense. By reducing the entire exchange to absurdity, we could say that Aristippus is stepping back from this entire business of arguing about who is happier than who, especially since at issue is not justice or courage, but diet, dress, perfume, sex and everything that falls under the heading of temperance. He is not necessarily denying the fruitfulness of reflective conversations, since he mentions that he is a ‘steward of Socratic discourses’; nor is he suspending evaluative judgment, since we have seen that he has a coherent ethical orientation. But he deflates Antisthenes’ attack without justifying himself or attempting to persuade his antagonist. It is just possible, if we return to Nehamas’ conception of irony, that part of the reason for which Aristippus adopts this strategy is because he does not ‘see the whole picture’, and is not certain it can be seen. In other words, it is possible that Aristippus feels he is happy, but is not confident he can systematically articulate the nature of that happiness. This suggestion rests on thin evidence within the letters, but it receives support from the dogmatic scepticism we know the Cyrenaic school professed. The Aristippus of these letters would then be what Mann proposes the historical Aristippus was, someone who believed that ‘philosophical argumentation is inadequate for settling philosophical disputes’.<sup>21</sup> This could partially explain his bemused disengagement from the arguments Antisthenes and Simon are attempting to start.<sup>22</sup>

I turn now from theories of irony to theories of humour, which will open up two additional interpretive avenues. The first begins from Freud’s theory of ‘tendentious’ jokes, in which the humourist expresses aggression toward the ‘butt’ of the joke for the amusement of himself and some third-person audience.<sup>23</sup> For example, look again at Aristippus’

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<sup>21</sup> Mann (1996) 113.

<sup>22</sup> My suggestion for Aristippus bears a superficial similarity to Critchley’s *risus purus* in 2002: 93-111. Much of Aristippus’ humour also fits with Freud’s musings in “Humour,” *SE* 21: 160-66, which inspires Critchley’s position.

<sup>23</sup> *SE* 8: 100.

humorous self-criticism: 'For the madness by which I thoughtlessly came to these absurdities, I curse myself as I deserve, that I should never leave these evils, since at this age and appearing to have some sense I still didn't want to be hungry, cold, in ill repute, and to grow a long beard.' Aristippus' intended audience should enjoy a smile *with* Aristippus *against* Antisthenes, since Antisthenes willingly suffers cold, hunger, disrepute and unkempt hair for the sake of his highly contestable principles. Freud thinks tendentious jokes require an audience because the humourist himself invests a lot of effort in overcoming the inhibition of his aggressive impulses, the liberation of which the audience can enjoy without any such effort. Humourist and audience then share the total upwelling of pleasure from this liberated aggression.<sup>24</sup> But this is a one-dimensional view of humour. More than just the pleasurable liberation of hostility, what Aristippus elicits from his audience is a feeling of intimacy created by shared knowledge and attitudes. Cohen argues,

When you offer your joke, you solicit [your auditor's] knowledge, you elicit it, in fact, virtually against their will, and they find themselves contributing the background that will make the joke work. Thus they join you. And they join you again, if the joke works, in their response, and the two of you find yourselves a community, a community of amusement.<sup>25</sup>

In Aristippus' case, the audience must grasp that his 'curse' is more like a 'prayer', that in saying he 'deserves' what he gets, he's boasting rather than acknowledging his faults, and that the 'good sense' he mentions should direct him to choose what he ironically labels evils (fine foods and beautiful women), not what he labels goods (rigorous austerity). The audience must not only understand all this, they must share the attitudes presumed by this double-speak. Simon the Cobbler, for example, would not find this funny. But for those who do, the humour creates a feeling of connection and sympathy, and can therefore contribute to Aristippus' ability to disarm critics and ingratiate himself with potential patrons. In other words, this mode of philosophical discussion could be an element of Aristippus' mysteriously felicitous 'art of living', which somehow combines integrity and dignity with hedonism and the cultivation of the wealthy and powerful.

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<sup>24</sup> *SE* 8: 155-56. Ancient theorists of humour were also keenly aware of its aggressive aspect (Halliwell (2008) 19-38 and 264-331).

<sup>25</sup> 1999: 40. Compare Gaut (1998) 52-54 on the "attitudinal structure" manifested by a series of jokes.

It is also possible that Aristippus' humour has a third, more reflective purpose. One function of humour can be to disrupt normative ways of thinking and behaving. This begins at the semantic level, where we have already seen Aristippus' reduction of ethical debate to nonsense. Here it is worth mentioning Freud's argument that there exists a pure delight in absurdity, since it liberates the speaker and sympathetic listeners from the laborious task of making sense.<sup>26</sup> But more important is the capacity of jokes, as Douglas has emphasized, to express alternatives to the norms active in any situation.<sup>27</sup> Bracht Branham has applied this theory to the Cynic Diogenes, whose antinomian antics, ranging from syllogisms that infer the legitimacy of cannibalism to an oration punctuated by shitting on stage, pretty obviously represent *alternative* ways of configuring accepted values.<sup>28</sup> Freud actually calls anti-institutional humour 'Cynic', so it is ironic that in our epistles it is Antisthenes' way of choosing friends and moderating enjoyment that is closer to the norm. Aristippus' humour may help listeners not only to reject Antisthenes' austerity, but also to accept his own unabashed hedonism. Even a sympathetic audience, for example, may not otherwise be ready to admit that they would like to 'stay with a tyrant, eating and drinking luxuriously every day, anointing themselves with some of the most exquisite perfumes, and trailing long Tarentine robes'. Aristippus' choice to communicate these desires via humour could allow his audience recognize their intuitive hedonism. Hence we could propose that Aristippus' humour not only creates the intimacy of shared attitudes, it might even lead his audience reflectively to affirm disavowed attitudes and consider re-organizing their values.<sup>29</sup>

We have now explored three ways of understanding the role humour plays in Aristippus' 'virtuosity in the art of living'. As an expression of irony, I suggested it could be a signal that Aristippus distrusts system-builders and dogmatism. As an expression of tendentious humour, it could connect him with an audience in the shared release of aggression and the shared intimacy of knowledge and attitudes. Finally, it could also be a way of encouraging listeners to consider whether they agree with Aristippus. All of these are possibilities for a charitable reading of Aristippean ethics in these epistles.

But at this point I should acknowledge that it is hard to pin down the third-person audience the jokes require. If this is a private letter, is the audience imaginary? Are we to

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<sup>26</sup> Freud *SE* 8: 125-27.

<sup>27</sup> Douglas (1968) 361-76.

<sup>28</sup> Branham (1996), which draws on enlightening discussions in Branham (1989) esp. 11-63

<sup>29</sup> Compare Gaut (1998) 66-67.

surmise that Aristippus wrote the letters with publication in mind? Both are possible, but we can also solve this puzzle by ascribing the audience, like the humour, to the epistolographer behind the fiction. Next I will focus on how the author's creative reimagining of Aristippus serves his own subtle purposes.

### III. THE EPISTOLOGRAPHER'S PERSPECTIVE

In order to investigate the epistolographer's perspective I must say a little more about the epistles' probable authorship and date.<sup>30</sup> Two discrete corpora make up most of the Socratic collection. First, letters 1-7 are ascribed to Socrates. They are written in smooth and urbane Attic, focus zealously on banal moralizing and rely heavily on Xenophon and Plato's *Apology*. Letters 8-27, by contrast, are ascribed to Socrates' real or fictional disciples. They mix slightly awkward Attic with what, probably due to accidents of transmission, looks like inconsistent Doric. They do not present any unified ethical outlook, much less concern themselves with straight-forward moralizing. Rather, they appear more concerned with biographical and antiquarian ornamentation. Their author draws not only on Xenophon and Plato's *Apology*, but also on many other Platonic dialogues and letters, works of Plutarch and on some sort of biographical and anecdotal collection such as that of Diogenes Laertius.

The letters of Aristippus belong to this second corpus, the provenance of which remains murky. Malherbe lumps them in with almost all pseudonymous philosophers' letters under the heading 'Cynic Epistles'.<sup>31</sup> But given the diversity and chronological expanse of ancient Cynicism, this category would be of little explanatory value even if there were reason to believe our letters were written by self-identifying Cynics.<sup>32</sup> Obens and Sykutris are more convincing in ascribing them to 'a Platonizing orator or a rhetorically schooled Platonist' of the second or third centuries CE.<sup>33</sup> Of obvious relevance for this ascription are the exercises in 'characterization' (*ethopoia*) and 'impersonation' (*prosopopoiia*) in all the surviving elementary handbooks of rhetorical education from the Roman empire. In these exercises students were asked what a certain sort of character would say in a certain situation, for

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<sup>30</sup> With this paragraph see Sykutris (1931) 981-87; (1933) 112-21.

<sup>31</sup> Malherbe (1977) 27-34.

<sup>32</sup> Pace Köhler's (1928) remark that 'Die kynische Tendenz in den meisten Briefen ist unverkennbar' (5), Sykutris (1933) rightly notes 'eine gewisse Abneigung gegen das grobe Auftreten und den Schmutz der Kyniker (trotz 20)' (113).

<sup>33</sup> Quotation from Sykutris (1933) 121. Cf. Obens (1912) 6 and 66-78; and Köhler (1928) 4-5.

example a man when leaving his wife for a journey; or what a historical or mythical character should have said on a particular occasion, for example Alexander before the battle of Issus. These exercises could also take epistolary form.<sup>34</sup> Well-educated adults sometimes continued to produce ‘characterized’ or ‘impersonated’ speeches and letters, the object of which was the display of wit, erudition and mental agility.<sup>35</sup> Our author’s handling of Attic and Doric, neither of which resembles the spoken Greek of the period, his numerous literary and philosophical allusions, and his liberal use of obscure personal and place names all help to situate his letters in this domain of conspicuous and competitive *paideia*.<sup>36</sup>

Looking at the letters as specimens of rhetorical *epideixis* opens up several interpretive possibilities. The first is that their author uses Aristippus as a mouthpiece to sketch a critique of Cynicism. This would be an opportunity not only to display his philosophical learning, but also – behind a veil of ‘figured speech’<sup>37</sup> – to defend his own lifestyle and criticize its real or imaginary detractors. After all, the Cynics’ radical notion of ‘freedom’ excluded reliance on Roman patrons, not only Sicilian tyrants; and their radical notion of ‘nature’ excluded the laborious education and exquisite satisfactions of imperial sophistry, not only Aristippus’ carnal luxury. Speaking of Aelius Aristides’ critique of Plato, Anderson writes, ‘As so often the sophist is in his element in an imaginary court, winning hands down against his long-deceased but remarkably resilient rival.’<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Antisthenes’ Cynic position, poorly defended by its boorish proponent, is annihilated by our learned epistolographer. Cynicizers of his own time are swept away by the same attack.

But our author’s purposes are surely not exhausted in a serious critique of Cynicism, which corresponds to the arguments that I reconstructed in section one. We should also reconsider the letters’ tendentious humour, which I explored in section two. Insofar as Cynics

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<sup>34</sup> The surviving elementary rhetorical handbooks are assembled and translated by Kennedy 2003. The extension of *ethopoia* into letter-writing is suggested by Theon, *Exercises*, 115 and Nicolaus the Sophist, *Preliminary Exercises*, 67. On the extent of common acquaintance with Plato in the second sophistic, see de Lacy (1974).

<sup>35</sup> See Whitmarsh (2005) 20-21 with further references.

<sup>36</sup> On the epistles’ use of obscure names see Sykutris (1933) 115-16.

<sup>37</sup> On *logoi eskhematismenoi* see Whitmarsh (2001) 57-59.

<sup>38</sup> Anderson (1993) 141. The reference is to Aristides’ *Or. 2, Against Plato in Defence of Rhetoric*. Among our author’s probable contemporaries Lucian (esp. *Vit. Auct.*, *Herm.*, *Symp.*, *DMeretr.* 10) and Alciphron (esp. 3.9, 4.7, 4.17) come closer to our letters’ combination of erudition, humour and criticism of philosophy and philosophers.

remain the butt of these jokes, we can say that it is now the epistolographer rather than Aristippus who shares with his audience the pleasure of disinhibited aggression and the intimacy of common judgments. But is Aristippus himself immune from this implicit criticism? Granted, the author seems to imply that hedonism, humour and accommodation to the power structures of the real world are better than asceticism, self-righteous vehemence and an inhuman crusade to ‘free’ oneself from every sort of cultural constraint. To this extent Aristippus is recuperated as a model for the epistolographer’s own aspirations. But even if he treats Aristippus more sympathetically than the other philosophers, we need not take him to endorse Aristippus’ beliefs and lifestyle wholeheartedly.

Indeed there are grounds for thinking that he intends to present Aristippus’ ironic disengagement from principled debate, which I earlier suggested was an expression of epistemic diffidence, in a rather less favourable light. For example, Aristippus implicitly claims that friendship with Dionysius is a great thing, since it both provides him with luxury and enables him to save Aeschines’ Locrian friends. But anyone who has read Plato’s *Seventh Letter* – as our author probably has – might find Aristippus smugly overconfident. Does he really think a quick mind and a good sense of humour will allow him to navigate the intrigues of tyrannical Syracuse? Perhaps we should see Aristippus’ glib nonchalance as the flip-side to Antisthenes’ vehement asceticism: both are immoderately one-sided, so the extravagant promises each makes about securing happiness are laughable.

It would then be significant that when we last see Aristippus in this collection, in letter 27, he is dying on the island of Lipara. His daughter has been sending him requests for help with the Cyrenean government, but Aristippus has not been able to provide any. ‘I received a series of letters from you,’ he says,

in which you asked me to come to you as soon as possible in Cyrene. You say you’re not being well treated by the inspectors, nor is your husband able to handle the matter, since he’s a very respectful type and unaccustomed to political troubles. I myself was trying to get Dionysius to release me to sail to you when fate intervened, and I fell ill at Lipara.

282.2-9 Malherbe

First, what is Aristippus doing on Lipara? The island is off the north coast of Sicily, the opposite of the direction Aristippus should be sailing if he wants to return to Cyrene. This may be the epistolographer’s little joke: one meaning of the adjective *liparos* is ‘rich,



comfortable, easy’,<sup>39</sup> just like Aristippus. This is not the only possible pun in the letter. The phrase I have translated ‘fell ill’ (*malakōs eschon*) could also be rendered ‘became cowardly, soft, indulgent, like a *kinaidos*’: the adjective *malakos* has many negative connotations.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the name of Aristippus daughter is Arētē, which is close enough to *aretē*, or ‘virtue’, to be an easy pun. So, dying in his flaccid and unctuous luxury, Aristippus receives an imploring letter from his daughter, but cannot go to ‘Virtue’s’ aid. She has been asking for practical help, and what he offers her are some platitudes about the preciousness of the philosophy he has imparted and some bizarre advice about moving to Athens and playing Aristippus to Xanthippe’s Socrates. It is tempting to read this as so much gaseous blathering: unable at this key moment to manipulate Dionysius, engage with the political actors in Cyrene, or help his daughter and grandson, Aristippus falls back on the comfortingly vague optimism of his world of words.

So we need not take Aristippus’ cheerful evasion of principled debate as an expression of epistemic diffidence. Rather, his facile optimism may be another object of the epistolographer’s subtle and humorous criticism. Aristippean hedonism is better than Cynic austerity, but suffers from the same impractical one-sidedness.<sup>41</sup> The only person with a realistic and practical understanding of the situations in these letters is the author – and of course you, dear readers, if you get the jokes.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

I began from the suggestion in the scholarship that Aristippus was an ‘artist of living’ rather than a thinker, so that nothing substantial could be said about his ethics. The conception of philosophy as an ‘art’ is most often associated with the European tradition after Nietzsche. It frequently relies on the premise that ‘truth’ in general is an intersubjective construction, from which the ‘authentic’ individual must emerge through a courageous act of will, transformative commitment to libidinal drives, or spiritual exercise and self-elaboration. These premises are foreign to ancient philosophy. Nevertheless, there are strong lines of

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<sup>39</sup> LSJ s.v. λιπαρός, def. III. I thank an audience member at Durham University, where I delivered a version of this paper, for this suggestion.

<sup>40</sup> LSJ s.v. μαλακός def. III.2; for ‘fell ill,’ see III.3.

<sup>41</sup> George Boys-Stones suggests to me that this confirms that our epistolographer has Platonist leanings: Antisthenes and Aristippus between them stand for the bankruptcy of Stoic, Cynic, and Epicurean philosophy as alternatives to Platonism.

resemblance and influence between ancient philosophical ‘crafts of living’ and post-Nietzschean ideals of artful self-creation.<sup>42</sup> Most important for our purposes, ancient ethics generally aims to articulate and satisfy inchoate existential impulses through the simultaneous development of reflective theories and deliberate manners of speaking, thinking, feeling and acting. Artful behaviour and forceful reasoning are thus complementary, not disjunctive.

I have argued that the artfulness of Aristippus in the Socratic epistles lends itself to discursive explanation in several ways. In my first section I fleshed out the character and evaluative orientation implied by these letters. Since this did not seem fully to capture Aristippus’ artistry, I next focused on the letters’ unusually humorous dimension. The epistemic implications and interpersonal effects of Aristippean wit and irony enriched our appreciation of his philosophy, but also pointed toward the epistolographer behind the fiction. Thus I concluded by addressing how this creative reimagination serves its author, who both appropriates Aristippus’ beliefs and jokes and implicitly tops them with his playful critique.

Not all these readings are compatible, so where does that leave us? It would be a mistake to try to pull together all the loose ends in this analysis, since one of the characteristics of biography-as-philosophy is that it does not lend itself to the closed systematicity of theory. Instead, it presents its readers with a core of beliefs and tendencies amenable to various levels of analysis and critique. In pseudonymous works like these, the perspective of the real author and his readers adds an additional layer of complexity. In this particular case, there is no reason to deny that even the epistolographer and his notional audience could toggle between admiring Aristippus’ versatility and wit and looking down on his shortcomings. This indeterminacy is far from confirming Mann’s judgment that Aristippean philosophy ‘is not to be explained, but shown.’ This is so only if we think that ‘philosophical explanation’ necessarily aims at producing a single and definitive interpretation. If we accept instead that philosophy may aim to explain a variety of lines of thought provoked by ethically engaged behaviour, then we should say that there is a great deal to be explained in Aristippus’ behaviour in these letters. With appropriate modifications, the same will be true of much of the semi-fictional and semi-biographical material that makes up our evidence for the historical Aristippus.

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<sup>42</sup> Nehamas (1998) explores some of these. For broader discussion of ancient philosophies as crafts of living, see Hadot (1995) and (2002), Sellars (2003a). Foucault (2005), (2010) and (2011) are also well worth reading in this regard, especially since they straddle the fuzzy line between scholarship on ancient philosophy and ‘creative’ modern philosophy.

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